The Fourth Church Pulpit

SAY GRACE

November 22, 1992

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611 2094
312-787-4570 John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14, Colossians 1:11-20

"...may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks..."
Colossians 1:11,12 (NRSV)

We used to call it "saying grace," an odd way to put it. What it meant was "say thank you." Say gratitude. Say the grace I was told and what I said without much variation was what I had been taught. "God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for this food..." or when Dad was at work and we wanted to see how much irreverence we could get away with... "Here's the bread. Here's the meat. Good God, let's eat." Elemental, simple prayers of thanksgiving. There is a theological reason why it is called "saying grace"; namely there is something more basic than whatever gratitude we happen to be feeling at mealtime — and it is the mystery and givenness of creation, the gift of life itself, the miracle of our being. To acknowledge that, to stand or sit in awe before it, to say thank you for that basic grace is very close to the purpose of religion.

It also provides moments of wonderful humanity. To our table years ago we had invited a Synod Executive and his wife who we deeply admired and who was my friend and mentor until his death several years ago. Jim Sala, too sick to be here, wrote the Charge to the Pastor for my Service of Installation as he had for every one of my installations: this time David Donovan read it.

In any event Jim and Helen sat at our formica-top table for Sunday dinner,and I asked him to "say the grace" for us. We bowed our heads. Jim was bald on top — completely, although he had a fairly generous wreath of hair around the perimeter. So, when he bowed his head at our table our three-year-old saw something she had never seen before. "Daddy," she exclaimed, "he has a hole in his head." We laughed about it for years and the incident itself became a metaphor for the blessing of his friendship.

Before it is anything else, religion is something akin to awe, praise, adoration, Frederick Buechner says begins when poetry begins with a lump in your throat. The basic religious act is thanksgiving before the enormous mystery of life, the unaccountable fact of our being.

It accounts, I think, for the durability of the Thanksgiving holiday which, after all, is pretty tame and simple compared to say the Fourth of July or Christmas. It is, someone noticed, the one holiday that has successfully avoided much commercialization. People don't buy special clothes for it. Homes are not decorated, at least elaborately; there are few gifts. It is a time for gratitude for basic things, life itself, food to eat, friends, family, a day to "say grace."

New Testament scholar John Koenig says that praise and thanksgiving are a heartbeat within the New Testament. He points out that there are two hundred occasions of our being urged by the New Testament to give God thanks and praise, even when there don't appear to be any reasons for being glad and grateful.

Over and over again Paul urges his readers to assume a basic posture of gratitude no matter what is happening to them. It's almost as if things will be better regardless of what's happening if only you can express gratitude. And in a way that's right. To be grateful is to be more whole. Psychologists know that a basic stance of gratitude toward other people and life in general — seeing the grace in every day, every person, every new experience — is one component at least of emotional health. C. S. Lewis, who lived through some very dark days as his beloved wife died of cancer said, "Praise seems to be inner health made audible." [*Reflections on the Psalms,* p. 80] I think we know that intuitively. It's why we insist on teaching our little ones to say "thank you" as soon as they are able to talk. We know that they need — not the givers of gifts, the providers of food and shelter — but they, the children, for their own sakes, need to learn how to say grace.

Is there any situation more uncomfortable and awkward than to send a gift and not be thanked? It's not that you need the "thank you" particularly, but until it comes you're never sure that the gift arrived, that it was received, never sure that your love or whatever it was you were sending in the form of the gift, was accepted, understood, received. A "thank you" closes the loop of grace and it is not closed until it is done. A friend of mine says that's why she became a minister in mid-life. Twenty- five years before she had done the unthinkable, the unpardonable - if not sin, then social faux pas. She enjoyed a large and elaborate wedding with many, many gifts and never wrote thank you notes. With her proper and strict upbringing she carried the burden of her guilt all her life and laughingly suggests that she resorted to theological seminary as a kind of radical penance.

There is basic emotional and spiritual wholeness in the experience and expressions of gratitude, the wholehearted and exuberant love for the world, our own lives. It is a good thing to say grace... in all circumstances.

What Paul was getting at in all this cheerleading, all this urging people who, after all, were not in such great circumstances, a tiny minority, often persecuted, hated, misunderstood, terrified by the determined hostility of the authorities.... What Paul was getting at, of course, is that amazing grace which transcends the immediate situation — that incredible miracle that in Jesus Christ God loves us, and is with us, and blesses us, and will forever keep us safe.

When Christians say grace, it is for that as well.

In the portion of a letter to the Colossians, which we heard, the theme is introduced: "May you be prepared to endure everything, giving thanks to the Father."

And then shift, a hymn to Christ, which among other things describes him as the firstborn of creation, the one in whom all things were created; the one in whom all things hold together; the one in whom God is pleased to dwell and through whom God is reconciled to all people. It's expansive and soaring, what the scholars call "High Christology" and you can almost hear it in Gregorian Chant with the smoke of the incense rising into the mysterious darkness of the cathedral.

At the time, in addition to persecution from the authorities the Church was engaged in a fierce argument about what, if anything, Jesus Christ had to do with this world — this earth — these bodies of ours — this creation. This little hymn is important because it cuts to the heart of the question — the reason why we feel basic gratitude.

The argument was with people called Gnostics. You may have heard of them. Some people still think like the Gnostics. The Gnostics assumed that the material world was evil, that God could have nothing to do with it. In fact, the Gnostics reasoned God could not have had anything to do with creation. Creation must have been carried out by a lesser deity, one of God's appointees, a kind of junior executive.

The Gnostics had a big problem with Jesus because he was so human, so earthy, so they tried to spiritualize him and at all costs keep him distinct from the God of creation who picks up a ball of mud and makes human beings, who fumes and fusses and laughs and rages and weeps and scolds and forgives and loves passionately through the pages of Hebrew Scripture.

So in this hymn we hear the early church saying what it believed. "Saying grace." The God of creation is the same God who came among us in Jesus Christ. The God of the incarnation is also the God of the creation. Something essential is lost when religion focuses only on this world, to be sure. But something equally important is lost when faith focuses on sin, forgiveness and salvation and ignores the basic mystery of the created order.

One of the first things the Bible says about God is that God created the world, stepped back and took a long look at the creation and called it good. The word, Walter Brueggemann suggests, really means "lovely." Now that is a very important idea: the created order is good and lovely. It is important because religion has so often come to the opposite conclusion, namely that creation is not good and not lovely, but rather dirty, to be avoided, or to be ashamed of, to be repressed or overcome.

Think of how much human religion can be described by that sad litany. But the basic and radical Biblical word is that creation is lovely: creation is grace and the first word to be said about it is "thank you."

It has been suggested by historians of culture that the environmental disaster in which we find ourselves is a result of Western Christianity forgetting the basic goodness and loveliness of creation, the old argument with Gnosticism, and focusing all its attention on sin, confession and redemption. Catholic theologian Matthew Fox gets himself in a lot of trouble with the Vatican by saying things like that and by reminding us that 300 years ago the church decided that science, the academic inquiring into the mysteries of creation, the world, nature, the universe, was hostile to religion and should be kept at a distance and, when necessary, repressed. It seemed to me heavily ironical that just a few weeks ago the church finally apologized for its condemnation of Galileo.

Isn't it fascinating that science, which for centuries, including this one, we thought might be the enemy, now speaks a word that sounds Biblical, a word I think is occasionally more faithful to the creation than the word of religion. Lewis Thomas, President Emeritus of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, a physician and a biologist, speaks about creation with deep reverence and when he says his grace sounds like an Old Testament prophet.

> "Human beings simply cannot go on as they now are going, exhausting the earth's resources, altering the composition of the earth's atmosphere, depleting the numbers and varieties of other species upon whose survival we, in the end, depend. It is not simply wrong, it is a piece of stupidity on the grandest scale."

And then, at the end of the book, this consummate man of science who never uses the word God turns mystic, almost theological.

> "One thing eludes me, always has and likely always will; if the earth is what I think it is, an immense being, intact and coherent, does it have a mind? If it does, what does it think?"

So science, if we listen carefully, will help us "say grace."

And when rigid piety will not allow us to rejoice in the creation, or merely our busy life in this busy city embraced by steel and concrete — art, music, poetry can be counted on to speak with integrity and eloquence: Van Gogh painting his brilliant sun flowers and vivid iris as he descended into the darkness of despair and depression.

Every time we sing the favorite hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," we are singing Ludwig Van Beethoven's personal affirmation of praise and gratitude for the gift of creation, as he descended into the silence of deafness. "The Ode to Joy," Beethoven "saying his grace."

Or e. e. cummings' poetic explosion of grateful praise:

> "i thank you God for most this amazing day:for the leaping,greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes."

Every autumn when the Pennsylvania mountains turned brilliant red and gold, the one who taught me how to say grace would send a copy of her favorite poem.

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide gray skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Lord, I do fear
Thous't made the world too
beautiful this year."
[*God's World*, Edna St. Vincent Millay]

Matthew Fox says we ought to spend less time thinking about original sin and more time celebrating our "original blessing."

Fox says we ought to fall in love at least three times a day - with another person, with an animal, a tree or flower and with a little Mozart. Falling in love every day with Mozart, he advises, can keep you joyfully busy for seven years. [See *Creation Spirituality*, p. 30]

So, say your grace. Open your eyes. Lift up your head and heart and give voice to your gratitude. Thank someone today for being who he or she is. Thank them for being whatever they are for you. Facing a difficult decision, surgery, a persistent problem with a relationship? Give St. Paul the benefit of the doubt. Start with gratitude for your own resources, the skill of the doctor, the good things about the person with whom you are having trouble and see if saying grace doesn't transform it. Say your grace, quietly in worship, and in some new act of responsibility for this wondrously fashioned and redeemed creation.

Among other things Thanksgiving in our culture is the beginning of Christmas. Advent arrives next Sunda and we will begin officially and liturgically with our somber purples and lovely music. But last evening the lights went on up and down Michigan Avenue and yesterday the first Christmas carols were heard from the Salvation Army trumpets and sometime this week we'll get out the Christmas albums and tapes and discs.

That used to bother me — that confusing mystery of celebrations, that premature and forced cheer. It doesn't bother me any more. It's a good thing I have come to believe, in the middle of Thanksgiving, for the bounty and goodness and loveliness of creation, to find ourselves drawn forward to that indescribable gift of love and grace; to praise the God of creation who in Jesus Christ makes all things new, who promises to love us and to be with us and from whom nothing, not even our own death, will separate us.

To begin — a whole season of thanksgiving, gratitude for creation, which moves gently but with the inevitability of birth itself, to that loveliest of creation's lovely mysteries — a child, our savior, our joy, our peace.

Thanks be to God.

The Fourth Church Pulpit

EVERYDAY HOLINESS

November 29, 1992

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611 2094
312-787-4570 John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."
—Matthew 24:42 (NRSV)

No one knew for certain when Jesus was born, so the earliest Christians did not observe his birth date. The Roman Empire, on the other hand, went wild during the last week of the calendar year. The year-end celebration in Rome was a real, week-long party with games and races and gladiators and eating and drinking and carousing. The Christians, who ordinarily tried to be as inconspicuous as possible because of the government's penchant for picking on them and persecuting them, were suddenly very visible. They were the ones who wouldn't play.

And so the Christians decided to celebrate the most important thing they could think of — the birth of Jesus Christ — on the very day the week-long Roman Carnival began — "Christ Mass." As the custom caught on they established a time to prepare for it, a "Winter Lent," a period of reflection and penitence, an occasion to think about the most basic and precious beliefs — that God so loved the world as to come among us, to live in the world — incarnation. And, in order to do that properly, Advent was a somber and serious time; the liturgical color they assigned to it was purple, the color of penitence and royalty, the same color as Lent. The Advent texts they used in their worship point ahead to the fulfillment of creation, a time of judgment and of hope. Their Advent music was gorgeous, but somber, and in a minor key. And they reasoned, after we have prepared for four weeks, we will be ready to celebrate Christmas.

On Michigan Avenue Christmas started, to the best of my knowledge, during the last week of October when the first green plastic pine garlands and red plastic bows started showing up over the perfume counters. This weekend was a very serious start to very serious shopping which will mean success and recovery or shortfalls and lamenting up and down the Avenue.

It is a precarious day theologically and ecclesiastically. And it never arrives without a memory recurring which has come to define for me the church's theological and cultural quandary. I call it "the Day of the Parade Prayer."

The Chamber of Commerce of the small Indiana city had decided to inaugurate the Christmas season on the first Sunday of Advent with a parade, which would attempt to incorporate not only the traditional Santa Claus theme but also the religious content as well. It was a well-intended and ambitious idea. Upon me was bestowed the honor of delivering the invocation for the beginning of the parade from a reviewing stand high up on the Court House steps. It was, I recall, bitterly cold. I arrived in plenty of time, having hurried away from worship, parked and walked a mile or so to the Court House. On the reviewing stand were the Mayor, the City Council, the County Commissioners, the head of the Street Department, police, fire officials, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce. He told me that the sequence for starting the festivities had been carefully and precisely planned. First he would welcome the crowd which was already shivering in the Court House square. Then the Mayor would say a few words; then several other officials would bring greetings.

The lead band in the parade would play the "National Anthem" and then I was to step to the microphone and deliver my invocation. Immediately after the prayer the band director was going to shoot off a rocket from a pistol he held high and that was the signal for the parade to begin, for the band to start playing "Frosty the Snowman" and to step off. It was very cold and it took a long time to get it all organized. I recall shivering, wondering how I had gotten into this and profoundly hoping that there were no members of the theological faculty of the University of Chicago in the crowd — who had talked a lot about Christianity and culture and not allowing the Gospel to be assimilated into the values of the world. Finally, it began. The President of the Chamber of Commerce welcomed everybody, the Mayor greeted the huge and shivering crowd, so did all the

dignitaries, the band played the "National Anthem," and exactly on schedule, I approached the podium, parade prayer in hand. Just as I said, "Let us pray," the band director, carried away no doubt by the drama of the moment, shot off his pistol, the flare rose high in the air, the drums rolled off, "Frosty the Snowman" began, the parade started and I stood there... an unprayed parade prayer in my hand. It was a precarious day.

The trouble is, we can't compete any more than the early church could compete with the Roman carnival. We did compromise this year and put our outside wreaths and greens up a week early, but we're not ready to sing our carols — not quite yet.

The reason is the same as it has been for twenty centuries. It takes some serious preparing to properly celebrate the birth of God's son.

It is so easy to miss, to trivialize, to romanticize, to sentimentalize and to misunderstand. In fact, misunderstanding God's relationship to the world is much of what the Bible is about.

Jesus' people had been waiting for the Messiah, living in hopeful expectation for centuries. During the worst of times — invasion, defeat, captivity, oppression, persecution — they held tightly to a precious hope that God would come and make things right. A day of reckoning was coming, a day unlike any before when a messianic hero would descend from the clouds and restore their fortunes. The Son of Man was what they called this person: some said he would be the Messiah. Others said he would simply be the one to push the enemies into the sea, punish those who were profiting by Israel's misery and establish Israel's power and autonomy and glory and pride. A lovely hope. Who wouldn't hold it tightly?

Jesus used the vocabulary and some of the images of this apocalyptic vision, but consistently he seems to have warned his followers that this way of thinking misses the point. Invested so thoroughly in the end of things, the final days, it misses the holiness and beauty of these days. Expecting God's final judgment at the end of time, it misses God's love and peace and reconciliation — this time, this world, this place.

Thomas Moore, psychotherapist and author, formerly a member of a monastic order, has written a fine new book, *Care of the Soul,* in which he observes:

> "There are two ways of thinking about church and religion. One is that we go to church in order to be in the presence of the holy and to have our lives influenced by that presence. The other is that church teaches us directly and symbolically to see the sacred dimension of everyday life." [p. 214]

It is Moore's opinion that the good and true religion always shows us the holy in the everyday. His name for it is "vernacular spirituality" and he observes that if the sacred is removed from life, our religion can actually become an obstruction to what is sacred in life.

Fascinating thought — that when it focuses on the extraordinary religion actually prevents us from seeing and hearing and experiencing what is authentically holy. It's what Jesus was talking about when he addressed his disciples to be watchful, lest they miss God's coming into life. It is, I believe, God's word to us always — as we begin this holy season — and it is the word we must say to one another and together to the world.

God's coming into history in the birth of Mary of Nazareth's baby is a sign that the world, history, life itself, is the place where we can expect and anticipate the presence and power of God's love. That is a common idea — the most revolutionary religious idea anybody every thought.

Sometimes it is a dangerous idea. Sometimes when Christian people start talking and acting as if they really believe that the ordinary can become sacred, that the purpose of God's activity is not what some cynically call "pie in the sky bye and bye," but a better life in the here and now; that God can be counted on to show up in marketplace, courtroom, and jail cell) and not just the high altar of the cathedral. Sometimes those ideas sour like trouble.

I had the privilege recently of a conversation with Protestant church leaders from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, all of whom told us again that belonging to the church and affirming the faith was the one way people could say "no" to the power of a totalitarian state; that church membership was always dangerous and occasionally fatal; that to be identified with the Christian Church was to be banned from any position of influence, from going to a university for instance. These brave people who lived with four decades of oppression told us something people in this nation need to hear, namely that dictators always recognize the power of a hope based on the theology of Advent — God's coming Kingdom.

The word we must speak at Advent is about a better world coming, a world of peace and reconciliation and justice; frankly it doesn't have anything to do with the retail bonanza on Michigan Avenue. But it has everything in the world to do with people who live a mile west of here, who do not have enough money to do their Christmas shopping on Michigan Avenue and would not be particularly welcome even if they did. Our word in Advent is that God can be counted on to be present in this world, particularly where and when the world needs a little compassion and love and peace and fairness.

The prophet Isaiah, centuries before the birth, saw the picture.

> "They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks:
> nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> neither shall they learn war any more."

Advent is a time to recall that the God we believe and trust, is a God involved in beating swords into plowshares, a God who is and will always be radically involved in the human situation. Advent is a time to think about hope — not merely our eternal destiny, but real hope in a real world: hope for more plows and fewer swords, hope for better schools and homes and hospitals, and fewer hand guns, AK-47s and UZIs.

Advent is about the power of that idea, that the God of the universe is on the side of peace and justice and reconciliation. So God's people — regardless of the circumstances, living under Communist dictatorship, or right-wing dictatorship, or in the gentle dictatorship of consumerism, or the dictatorship of poverty — are people of radical hope.

One of my very favorite descriptions of God's people during Advent is "people who are living on tiptoe — living in expectation." [see Halford Luccock, *A Sprig of Holly*, p. 46]

We understand the power of hope which expects God's Kingdom to come into the world. We know that one of the absolute prerequisites for progress politically is a strong hope which expresses itself in a refusal to accept the status quo, whether the topic is world peace, the AIDS epidemic, or the warfare being waged on the streets of our city by a population armed to the teeth.

The one final test of Christian faith, someone has said, is the ability to sustain hope in the face of what seems like the impossible realities of modern life.

It's not that we don't like to play. It's just that this news is so good and so profound that sometimes it seems that the commercial Christmas simply trivializes it.

The word we have to share in Advent is finally — intensely personal. In *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe,* which is being restaged, Trudy, the bag lady ventures into theology:

> "One thing I have no worry about is whether God exists. But it has occurred to me that God has Alzheimers and has forgotten that we exist."

It is the theological question asked by prophets, sages, poets, philosophers and common men and women in every age since the beginning of time. Not so much, "Is there a God?" as, "Does it have anything to do with me?"

And the word of Advent is that it does — it has everything in the world to do with you and me. The word of Advent is that God comes into the everydayness of your life and mine, with healing to deal with our hurts:

> —that God comes with forgiveness for our guilt;
> —that God comes and speaks a word to uneasy consciences;
> —that God comes with reconciling love for our alienation, separation.

The word of Advent is that love, and forgiveness, and reconciliation are real, not simply in some celestial paradise beyond time, but here and now: that God's love is born in the midst of life's ambiguity and complexity.

The Advent promise is of a kingdom which insists on appearing in the midst of life, not unlike a delicate blossom pushing bravely up through the snow, or a surprising bright star on a dark night.

So watch for it, closely.

Watch in the days ahead for unexpected grace in your relationships; for almost unbelievable forgiveness for your mistakes, your betrayals. Watch for love which surprises you with its vulnerability and humility; for joy which refuses to be silent.

Watch for peace, unintimidated by violence. Watch for the gentle tugs of affection you will experience at unexpected moments in the next few weeks and which will leave you unaccountably moved, with tears in your eyes.

It's Advent, everyday holiness.

+ + + + + +

> Dear God, in all the noise and busyness in the weeks ahead, may we hear again the promise and the laughter and the singing of angels and the hope. Amen.